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SUBJECT: KUWAIT MEDIA ELECTION COVERAGE MAY 25-31: A CLEAR SPLIT
EMERGES

REF: KUWAIT 2026 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. Summary: A divide has emerged in how the Kuwait media are covering the upcoming parliamentary elections. Newspapers, which are privately owned, are delving with delight into controversial matters such as vote buying, women candidates and whether members of the ruling family should stand for election. Kuwait's only private TV station too has aired some hearty political commentary. By stark contrast, public television is under strict instructions from the Minister of Information to limit coverage to follow-up on election-related events and to broadcast only opinions that are presented in a neutral manner. As a result, the public are turning to newspapers and private TV for election information while public TV is virtually silent on the hot topic gripping the country. End summary.

Riveting Headlines Sell Papers

¶2. Kuwait's five Arabic-language and three English-language newspapers are dedicating large sections of their publications to upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for June 29. Moreover, they sometimes are grabbing attention, and buyers, with riveting headlines such as: "Poll Fever Heats Up," Kuwait Times, May 24; "Al-Mulaifi Urges Governmental Parties to Stop Bribing Voters," Al-Qabas, May 30; and "Reformists Demand International Observers," The Daily Star, May 24.

¶3. Stories in the print media have run the gamut of election-related topics, but the main focus has been on newly declared candidates and their platforms. (Note: The ten-day candidate registration period ended June 3. End note.) Several other key issues have emerged, however, that are receiving increased scrutiny in the press. They are: women candidates, corruption, and whether the law permits members of the ruling family to run for office (reftel).

A Woman's Place: The Parliament, Palace or Home?

¶4. As of the June 3 candidate registration deadline, 402 candidates have declared their intention to run for a seat in the National Assembly. Of these, 32, some eight percent, are women. Kuwait's first female candidates for national office are receiving added attention in the media when compared to their more numerous and politically experienced male counterparts. "Total Number of Candidates 148 Including 12 Women on the Third Day of Registration," Al-Rai Al-Aam, front page, May 28, is a typical example of the focus on women. Controversy, however, has surrounded some of the female candidates, making for good headlines.

15. One is Shaykha Fawziya Al-Sabah, a female member of the ruling family whose candidature cracked open the question of whether members of the ruling family can or should run for office. In the end, the Shaykha lost when she bowed to a government legal decision against her. "Royal Row over Elections," Kuwait Times, page one on May 28, was a typical headline on the debate. The issue in general received wide coverage in numerous other articles and opinion columns before it all ended with the May 31 front-page headline in Al-Rai Al-Aam, "Shaykha Fawziya Al-Sabah: I Reversed My Decision to Run for Election." Other examples of the diverse press coverage on the topic were: "Candidature by Royal Family Members a Flagrant Constitutional Violation," Al-Qabas, page 18, May 29; and "Al-Mubarak: No objection to Candidature by Royal Family members," Al-Seyassah, front page, May 30. Two male members of the Al-Sabah family also considered running for office and, like Shaykha Fawziya, changed their minds.

16. Equally if not more riveting has been coverage of death threats made to several women candidates, one of whom withdrew from the race out of fear (reftel). The print media covered these developments with captions such as "Al-Reshaid: I received a threat letter," and "Al-Bathali: Contacts to Dissuade Me from Candidature," Al-Seyassah, front page, May 29; and "Woman Candidate Naziha Al-Bathali: I Was Threatened but I Will Not Bow Down," Al-Rai Al-Aam, front page, May 30. An unnamed female candidate withdrew from the race due to the threats made against her as reported in the May 29 Al-Seyassah headline, "MOI Investigates Threat to Kill a Woman Candidate."

17. The print media is presenting coverage and opinions on a wide range of issues surrounding the new role of women in the nation's political life. Topics cover everything from the practical, such as whether wives would vote as instructed by their husbands, to the trivial, such as how upset some women were in having to reveal their ages in order to register for the polls. Those for and against the

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women received largely equal play, though the more conservative commentators made for attention-grabbing headlines such as, "Student Union Appeals to Interior Minister to Separate Women's Polling Stations from the Men's," Al-Seyassah, page 14, May 28. (Note: This represents a bit of grandstanding by the student union. There were separate polling places for the April municipal by-elections and it is widely expected and desired that there be separate polling sites for this election. End Note.) The more opinion-oriented pieces on women and the vote saw headlines such as, "Al-Kandari: Women's Participation in Elections Will Determine the Fate of Candidates," Al-Qabas, page 19, May 28, and "Mohammed Zain: A National Assembly without Women Is Not a National Assembly," Al-Seyassah, back page, May 31.

18. Kuwait public television aired a late evening program on May 28 dedicated to women's participation in elections. The broadcast began with a documentary on Kuwaiti women's struggle for political participation. The host then interviewed men and women on the street and took telephone calls during the show. Most public comments were optimistic about women in politics. Some, however, saw a woman's place as being at home. Still other women commented that it will be good to have a voice of their own in the National Assembly.

Elections Kuwaiti-Style

19. As in previous elections, allegations of vote-buying are widespread, though given the intense electoral competition this may merely be political mud-slinging. Candidates are rumored to be offering to pay as much as 1,000 Kuwaiti dinars, approximately \$3,500, and/or to provide other benefits such as jobs or grants in order to secure votes. Speculation in the print media on this issue is common as evidenced by the following headline: "Faisal Al-Mislim: Votes Are Being Bought Publicly," Al-Rai Al-Aam, front page, May 31. The government, candidates, and NGOs are also using the press to shine a light on the issue of corruption and financial abuses. Other print captions on the topic include "Al-Mulaifi Urges Governmental Parties to Stop Bribing Voters," Al-Qabas, pg. 15, May 30; "Mubarak Al-Wa'lan Withdraws in Protest against Corruption,"

Al-Seyassah, front page, May 30; and "Sajid Al-Abdali: We Appeal to Voters and Candidates to Support Nazaha's Campaign to Combat Vote Buying," Al-Qabas, page 16, May 31.

¶10. A sample editorial on the topics of corruption and reform came from Abdul Latif Al-Daij who wrote in the moderate Arabic-language daily Al-Qabas under the title "Let Us Be One Reformist Bloc": "The powers of corruption that stood against reform and caused the dissolution of the National Assembly no doubt have hidden weapons in their arsenal. They have surprises that will disappoint those who dream of reform. They would not have dissolved the National Assembly without being confident that they would be a majority in the next one and therefore maintain the status quo of corruption by preserving the 25 districts."

Public TV: Seen, but Not Heard

¶11. Glaringly absent from the topic of the day has been Kuwait's public TV news channel KTV1. Regularly scheduled newscasts have featured little reporting or analysis of elections since the Amir dissolved the National Assembly on May 21. What news there is on the topic has been limited to government announcements and the readings of newspaper clippings on the subject. The popular morning program "Good Morning Kuwait" on May 22 addressed that show's lack of election coverage when the host replied to an email from a viewer who had complained. The host stated on air that the show highlights local topics and "stays away from politics." By contract, the privately owned Al-Rai TV has featured talk shows with commentators openly debating the various sides of key issues, including the role of women. There are reports of the launch of two satellite channels to cover elections issues. "Flash" will reportedly offer 24-hour coverage of all of the election, and the "Parliament Channel," created in part by former MP Mohammed Al-Sager, will provide 6-7 hours per day of coverage of liberal candidates including Al-Sager, former Deputy Speaker Meshari Al-Anjari, and Dr. Rola Dashti.

No "Equal Time"

¶12. The reason for the low profile of public TV has turned out to be the work of the new Minister of Information Mohammed Al-Sanoussi. The English-language daily Kuwait Times reported on May 29 that the minister had instructed public TV and radio to not show or interview

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any parliamentary candidates. Stressing that the ministry is a neutral organization, Al-Sanoussi noted that Kuwait does not have the same laws as in the United States where candidates are given equal opportunities to appear on the public media. While the minister went on to encourage coverage without taking sides, the daily news broadcasts demonstrate how seriously KTV1 staff is taking the dictate. On the following day, another English-language newspaper, the Arab Times, reported that the Minister had discovered that in previous elections some public TV programs made cash "prizes" to candidates to support their campaigns. It appears that the new Minister is taking pains to ensure that the public media is not seen to be influencing the vote. The result is that the public are turning to pan-Arab satellite channels such as Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera or to the country's one private TV channel, Al-Rai, for TV coverage of election events.

¶13. Comment: Kuwait's generally robust print media has not disappointed its readers in covering the differing sides of key election issues. The day Parliament was dissolved, the Amir met with top editors-in-chief of all the major dailies. Word on the street was that he had requested the press to keep controversy to a minimum. However, an editor who was at the meeting told Emboff the opposite, that the Amir welcomed the press to report freely on all election-related topics. The truth is likely somewhere in between. While the Amir supports a free press, it was unclear in the initial days following the dissolution how members of Parliament and the public would react. In an effort to ensure calm, the Amir likely sought the assistance of the editors-in-chief in their role as opinion makers.

¶14. While the print media is reporting various sides of many election issues, the reports are overwhelmingly based on statements made by candidates, politicians and other leaders. Virtually non-existent is any type of independent investigative reporting on issues such as corruption and vote-buying or impediments to women candidates. End comment.

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